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Contemporary British Dramatists, Volume XIX:
THE VORTEX

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THE SPORT OF GODS. By JOHN COUNOS

FOUR ONE ACT PLAYS. By GWEN JOHN

(Continued on page 107)

THE VORTEX

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

By NOEL COWARD



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TO
G. CALTHROP
WITH A GOOD DEAL OF GRATITUDE

ACT I

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

PRESTON

HELEN SAVILLE

PAUNCEFORT QUENTIN

CLARA HIBBERT

FLORENCE LANCASTER

TOM VERYAN

NICKY LANCASTER

DAVID LANCASTER

BUNTY MAINWARING

BRUCE FAIRLIGHT

ACT I

The scene is the drawing-room of MRS. LANCASTER'S flat in London. The colours and decoration are on the verge of being original. The furniture is simple but distinctly expensive.

Persons shown are HELEN SAVILLE and PAUNCEFORT QUENTIN. HELEN SAVILLE and PAUNCEFORT QUENTIN are shown in by PRESTON. HELEN is a smartly dressed woman of about thirty. "PAWNIE" is an elderly maiden gentleman.

PRESTON: I'm expecting Mrs. Lancaster in at any moment now, Ma'am.

HELEN: Thank you, Preston, we'll wait a little.

PRESTON: Shall I get you some tea?

HELEN: No thanks, we've already had some—give me a cigarette, Pawnie, they're in that box on the table.

[PAWNIE hands her cigarette box. PRESTON goes out.]

PAWNIE: It may be tiresome of me, but I think all this colouring is oppressive.

HELEN: You make such a "Fetish" of house decoration, Pawnie.

PAWNIE (*wandering round the room*): Not at all, but I do like things to be good and right.

HELEN: Well, I don't consider the new frieze in your bathroom either good or right.

PAWNIE: How can you, Helen! It's too marvellous for words. Parelli designed it specially for me.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: Personally, it would make me self-conscious to sit in a bath surrounded by frisky gods and goddesses all with such better figures than mine.

PAWNIE: I find it encouraging. This whole room is so typical of Florence.

HELEN: In what way?

PAWNIE: Every way. Look at the furniture.

HELEN: A little artificial perhaps, but quite harmless.

PAWNIE: Dear Helen, you're such a loyal friend.

HELEN: I'm very fond of Florence.

PAWNIE: We all are. Oh, my God, look at that lamp-shade!

HELEN: I gave it to her last Christmas.

PAWNIE: Wasn't that a little naughty of you?

HELEN: I don't see why, it's extremely pretty.

PAWNIE: Too unrestrained. Such a bad example for the servants. (*He takes up frame from desk.*) Who's this boy?

HELEN: Tom Veryan. You must have seen him.

PAWNIE: Florence's past, present or future?

HELEN: Present.

PAWNIE: He has that innocent look that never fails to attract elderly women.

HELEN: Don't be a cat.

PAWNIE: I wasn't meaning Florence, she's too divine to be in any marked category.

HELEN: I wonder.

THE VORTEX

PAWNIE: Oh, yes, Helen, deathless sort of magnetism, you know.

HELEN: I often wonder what will happen to Florence eventually.

PAWNIE: My dear, I'm far too occupied in wondering what's going to happen to me to worry about other people.

HELEN: I've always thought your course was quite clear, Pawnie.

PAWNIE: However offensive that remark was intended to be, Helen, I shall take it in the most complimentary spirit.

HELEN: I'm sure you will.

PAWNIE: I expect Florence will just go on and on, then suddenly become quite beautifully old, and go on and on still more.

HELEN: It's too late now for her to become beautifully old, I'm afraid. She'll have to be young indefinitely.

PAWNIE: I don't suppose she'll mind that, but it's trying for David.

HELEN: And fiendish for Nicky.

PAWNIE: Oh, no, my dear, you're quite wrong there. I'm sure Nicky doesn't care a damn.

HELEN: It's difficult to tell with Nicky.

PAWNIE: He's divinely selfish; all amusing people are.

HELEN: Did you hear him play in Paris?

PAWNIE: Yes.

HELEN: Well?

THE VORTEX

PAWNIE: Erratic—one or two things perfect, but he's slovenly.

HELEN: He only takes things seriously in spurts, but still he's very young.

PAWNIE: Do you really think that's a good excuse.

HELEN: No, I'm afraid not, especially when so much depends on it.

PAWNIE: What does depend on it?

HELEN: Everything—his life's happiness.

PAWNIE: Don't be so terribly intense, dear.

HELEN: It's true.

PAWNIE: I'm quite sure Nicky will be perfectly happy as long as he goes on attracting people; he loves being attractive.

HELEN: Naturally, he's Florence's son.

PAWNIE: Such an exciting thing to be.

HELEN: You don't believe Nicky's got anything in him at all, do you?

PAWNIE (*lightly*): I don't think it matters, anyway.

HELEN: I do.

PAWNIE: But you've got a loving nature, Helen. I always know it.

HELEN: Nicky hasn't had a chance.

PAWNIE: Nonsense—he's had everything he wanted ever since the day he was born, and he'll go on wasting his opportunities until he dies.

HELEN: Quite possibly.

THE VORTEX

PAWNIE: Well, there you are then.

HELEN: He may have had everything he wanted, but he's had none of the things he really needs.

PAWNIE: Are you talking socially or spiritually.

HELEN: You're quite right, Pawnie, you wouldn't be so beautifully preserved if you'd wasted any of your valuable time or sincerity.

PAWNIE: I forgive you for that, Helen, freely.

HELEN: Thank you so much.

PAWNIE: You must realize one thing, everyone is sacrificed to Florence—it's as it should be—of course, she's a couple of hundred years too late—she ought to have been a flaunting, intriguing King's mistress, with black page boys and jade baths and things too divine——

[Enter PRESTON.

PRESTON (*announcing*): Miss Hibbert.

[Enter CLARA HIBBERT—*she is affected, but quite well dressed.* PRESTON *goes out.*

CLARA: My dears. Isn't Florence back yet?

HELEN: No, we're waiting for her.

PAWNIE: You look harassed, Clara.

CLARA: I am harassed.

HELEN: Why?

CLARA: I'm singing to-night for Laura Tennant—she's giving a dreadful reception at her dreadful house for some dreadful Ambassador——

PAWNIE: How dreadful!

THE VORTEX

CLARA: No one will listen to me, of course—they'll all be far too busy avoiding the Cup and searching for the Champagne.

HELEN: What are you singing?

CLARA: One Gabriel Faure, two Reynaldo Hahn's and an Aria.

PAWNIE: Which Aria?

CLARA: I can't think, but my accompanist will know—I've got a frightful headache.

HELEN: Why don't you take off your hat?

CLARA: My dear, I daren't—I've just had my hair done—I suppose you haven't got a "Cachet Faivre," either of you?

HELEN: No, but Florence has, I expect—Preston will know where they are—ring the bell, Pawnie.

PAWNIE (*ringing bell*): My poor Clara—I do hope your singing to-night will justify the fuss you're making this afternoon.

CLARA: Don't be so *brutal*, Pawnie.

HELEN: Is Gregory going with you?

CLARA: Of *course*—I *never* sing unless he's there—he gives me such marvellous moral support.

PAWNIE: "Moral" is hardly the word *I* should have chosen, dear.

[*Enter* PRESTON.

HELEN: Do you know if Mrs. Lancaster has any "Cachet Faivre" anywhere?

PRESTON: Yes, Ma'am—I think so.

THE VORTEX

CLARA: *Do* get me one, Preston, I'm suffering *tortures*.

PRESTON: Very well, Miss.

[*She goes out.*]

PAWNIE: Preston has such wonderful poise, hasn't she?

HELEN: She needs it in this house.

CLARA: I do wish Florence would hurry up. I want to borrow her green fan. I've got a new Patou frock that positively *demand*s it.

HELEN: She can't be long now.

CLARA: I suppose I daren't ask Preston for the fan and creep away with it?

HELEN: I shouldn't, if I were you—Florence is very touchy over that sort of thing.

CLARA: She promised it to me ages ago.

PAWNIE: Surely there isn't such a desperate hurry? You won't be singing until about half-past eleven.

CLARA (*petulantly*): My dear, I've got to *rehearse*—I don't know a *word*——

[*Re-enter PRESTON with a "Cachet Faivre" and a glass of water.*]

CLARA: You're a *Saint*, Preston—thank you a *thousand times*——

PAWNIE: Soak it a little first, dear, or you'll choke, and I should *detest* that.

[CLARA soaks "Cachet" and then swallows it
PRESTON goes out.]

CLARA: Now I must lie down *flat*—get out of the way, Helen.

THE VORTEX

PAWNIE: Perhaps you'd like us *both* to go *right* out of the room and sit in the *hall*?

CLARA: No, Pawnie, I should never expect the least consideration from you.

[She lies down flat on the divan, HELEN arranges cushions for her.]

CLARA: Thank you, Helen darling—I shall always come to you whenever I'm ill.

HELEN: That *will* be nice.

[Enter FLORENCE LANCASTER followed by TOM VERYAN. FLORENCE is brilliantly dressed almost to the point of being "outré." Her face still retains the remnants of great beauty. TOM is athletic and good looking. One feels he is good at games and extremely bad at everything else.]

FLORENCE: Helen—Pawnie, have you been here long?

PAWNIE: No, only a few hours.

FLORENCE: My dear. I'm so frightfully sorry—we've been held up for ages in the traffic. Davis is a congenital idiot. Always manages to get to a turning just as the policeman puts out his hand. No initiative whatever. What's happened to Clara? Has she been run over?

CLARA: No, dear, I've got a frightful head.

FLORENCE: Pawnie, you know Tom, don't you?—Tom Veryan, Mr. Quentin, I'm sure you'll adore one another.

TOM (*shaking hands*): How are you?

PAWNIE: Very well, thank you—how sweet of you to ask me?

FLORENCE: Is there anything I can do, Clara?

THE VORTEX

CLARA: Yes, dear, lend me your green fan for to-night.

FLORENCE: All right—but you *won't* get too carried away with it, will you, dear? I should hate the feathers to come out. Does anyone want any tea?

HELEN: No thanks, dear

FLORENCE: Cocktails, then?

PAWNIE: It's too early.

FLORENCE (*ringing bell*): It's never too early for a cocktail.

CLARA: I should like to go quite quietly into a Convent, and never see anybody again ever——

PAWNIE: Gregory would be bored stiff in a Convent.

FLORENCE: We've just been to a most frightful Charity *matinée*. Nothing but inaudible speeches from dreary old actors, and leading ladies nudging one another all over the stage. (PRESTON *enters*.) Cocktails, Preston, and ask Barker to wrap up my green fan for Miss Hibbert to take away with her.

PRESTON: Very good, Ma'am. [*She goes out.*]

CLARA: You're an angel, Florence—I think I'll sit up now.

FLORENCE: Do, dear, then Tom will be able to sit down.

CLARA (*sitting up*): I really do feel most peculiar.

PAWNIE: You look far from normal, dear.

CLARA: If Pawnie's rude to me any more I shall burst into tears.

FLORENCE: Tom, give me a cigarette.

THE VORTEX

PAWNIE: Here are some.

FLORENCE: No, Tom has a special rather hearty kind that I adore.

CLARA: Lend me your lip stick, Helen, mine has sunk down into itself.

HELEN: Here you are.

CLARA: What a lovely colour! I look far prettier than I feel.

FLORENCE (*to Tom*): Thank you, angel.

CLARA: I shan't be able to get down to the house until Saturday evening, Florence—I'm seeing Gregory off to Newcastle.

PAWNIE: Why Newcastle?

CLARA: His home's just near there—isn't it too awful for him?

FLORENCE: Well, wire me the time of your train, won't you?

CLARA: Of course, dear.

HELEN: You're smelling divinely, Florence. What is it?

FLORENCE (*flicking her handkerchief*): It is good, isn't it?

PAWNIE: "Narcisse Noir" of Caron, I use it.

FLORENCE: Yes, you would, Pawnie.

[*Re-enter PRESTON with parcel.*]

PRESTON: Here is the fan, Miss.

CLARA (*taking it*): Thank you so much—you are sweet, Florence. A fan gives me such a feeling of *security* when I'm singing modern stuff. (PRESTON *goes out.*) I must rush now——

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: Don't you want a cocktail before you go?

CLARA: No, darling—I should only hiccup all the evening. Good-bye, you've been *such* a comfort—good-bye, Helen—Pawnie, you will be nicer to me over the week-end, won't you? I shall be *so* depressed, what with Gregory going away and everything—Good-bye, Tom—I shall dine in bed and give way at every pore——

[*She goes out.*]

PAWNIE: Poor Clara—she eternally labours under the delusion that she really matters.

HELEN: We all do that a little.

FLORENCE (*laughing*): You're awfully cruel to her, Pawnie.

PAWNIE: She upsets my vibrations.

FLORENCE (*before glass*): I've taken a sudden hatred to this hat. (*She takes it off.*) That's better—are you going to the “New Elaine” to-night, either of you?

HELEN: I'm not—but Pawnie is, of course.

PAWNIE: It's going to be *amazing*—what a cast, my dear! Marvellous Selwyn Steele, Nora Dean, and that perfect woman, Lily Burfield——

HELEN: I can't stand her, she always over-acts.

PAWNIE (*incensed*): How *can* you, Helen! Did you see her in “Simple Faith?”

HELEN: Yes, unfortunately.

PAWNIE: Oh, you really are too tiresome for words!

HELEN: Her technique creaks like machinery.

PAWNIE: It's sacrilege—she's too, too marvellous.

THE VORTEX

[Enter PRESTON with a tray of cocktails. Everyone helps themselves.]

FLORENCE: What do you think about it, Tom?

TOM: I've never seen her.

FLORENCE: Yes, you have. About three months ago, at the "Comedy."

TOM: Oh. . . . I don't remember

PAWNIE: Don't remember! An artist like that! Good God, it's agony!

HELEN: You'll look awfully tired at dinner-time, Pawnie, if you don't calm down a little.

FLORENCE: This is special—my own invention.

HELEN: Absolutely delicious.

TOM: A bit too sweet.

FLORENCE: Tom, *darling*, don't be so taciturn—he's always taciturn after a *matinée*.

PAWNIE: When's Nicky coming back?

FLORENCE: To-morrow, isn't it too divine? He's been away for a whole year, but I saw him for a moment on my way through Paris last month.

PAWNIE: Has he been working hard? ..

FLORENCE: I suppose so, but you know what Nicky is—bless his heart!

PAWNIE: I heard him play at Yvonne Mirabeau's.

FLORENCE: She's a loathsome woman, isn't she?

HELEN: Not as bad as that.

PAWNIE: She's a half-wit. I can't bear half-wits.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: She goes on so dreadfully about things—devastating.

PAWNIE: Funny Nicky liking her so much.

FLORENCE: Only because she keeps on saying how wonderful he is—that always appeals to Nicky.

PAWNIE: How old is he now?

FLORENCE: Twenty-four. Isn't it absurd to think I have such a grown-up son—old General Fenwick said last Thursday that— (*The telephone rings, she goes to it.*) Hallo—hallo—yes, my dear, how are you?—Yes, so am I, simply worn out. No, when? How perfectly marvellous. . . . No, dear, it's a prescription; but I can let you have a little in a jar. . . . Quite easy, all you do is just rub it on at night. . . . Don't be so silly . . . not in the least, if you send the car round that will be all right. . . . Very well. . . . Good-bye, darling. (*She hangs up receiver*). I give Clara Hibbert ten for stupidity, don't you, Helen?

HELEN: A hundred and ten.

PAWNIE: Ten's the limit.

TOM: I say, Florence—I think I'd better be getting along if I've got to be dressed and back here by half-past seven—

FLORENCE: You've got half an hour.

TOM: That's not very much.

FLORENCE: The car's outside . . . take it and send it straight back.

PAWNIE: Can it drop me, Florence dear? I always feel so much richer in your car than anyone else's.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: Of course, Pawnie.

[*The telephone rings again.*]

FLORENCE (*at telephone*): Hallo . . . yes . . . speaking.
. . . How do you do——?

PAWNIE: Good-bye, Helen, it's been divine——

HELEN: Ring me up at tea-time to-morrow.

FLORENCE: . . . How perfectly sweet of you . . . now, now really . . . well, naturally, if you persist in saying such charming things . . . (*laughing gaily*) . . . what nonsense. . . .

PAWNIE: Good-bye, Florence——

FLORENCE (*she puts her hand over mouthpiece*): It's that awful General Fenwick. . . . Good-bye, Pawnie dear, you're coming down to the house on Friday?

PAWNIE: Yes, too lovely——

FLORENCE: Helen's coming by the five o'clock—you'd better travel together.

PAWNIE: Perfect. (*To TOM.*) Are you ready?

TOM: Quite.

PAWNIE (*as they go out*): You *can* drop me first, can't you? I'm not as young as I was——

FLORENCE (*at telephone*): Please forgive me—people rushing in and out, this house grows more like a railway station every day . . . now, General, that was a deliberate compliment. (*She laughs.*) Ridiculous man . . . very well. . . . good-bye. (*She hangs up receiver.*) My God, ten for dreariness!

HELEN: He's not a bad old thing.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: No, but he tries to be, and that's what's so frightful. (*Arranging her hair before glass.*) I look like Death. . . . Isn't Tom a darling?

HELEN: Yes, dear, without being aggressively brilliant.

FLORENCE: I'm afraid, Helen, you're getting rather bitter.

HELEN: Nonsense.

FLORENCE: It's silly to be sarcastic about Tom.

HELEN: It's better than being maudlin about him.

FLORENCE: I don't know what you mean, dear. I'm not in the least maudlin, and never have been about anybody. I sometimes wish I could be—I'm too hard.

HELEN (*taking a cigarette*): Tom will let you down.

FLORENCE: Let me down? Why . . . how . . . I don't understand——

HELEN: You're more in love with him than he is with you.

FLORENCE: Don't be so *absurd*, Helen.

HELEN: It's true.

FLORENCE (*complacently*): He adores me—worships me—he's never seen anyone like me before in his life. I'm something strange . . . exotic——

HELEN: You're more in love with him than he is with you.

FLORENCE: You're getting on my nerves to-day, Helen.

HELEN: You do see that I'm right, don't you?

FLORENCE: If you knew some of the things he's said to me,

THE VORTEX

HELEN: I can guess them.

FLORENCE: That boy was utterly unawakened until he met me.

HELEN: He's very young.

FLORENCE: I've taught him—everything.

HELEN: Or nothing.

FLORENCE: Helen, I believe you're jealous.

HELEN: Don't be a fool.

FLORENCE: I wish I hadn't this fatal knack of seeing through people.

HELEN: How's David?

FLORENCE: I don't know—he ought to be home soon.

HELEN: Doesn't he ever suspect anything?

FLORENCE: Of course not—he adores me.

HELEN: It seems so strange not to see——

FLORENCE: I'm devoted to David—I'd do anything for him, anything in the world—but he's grown old and I've kept young—it does muddle things up so. I can't help having a temperament, can I?

HELEN: Temperament. . . . No.

FLORENCE: David's always loved me and never understood me—you see, I'm such an extraordinary *mixture*. I have so many *sides* to my character. I adore being at home and running the house and looking after David and Nicky——

HELEN: You don't exactly overdo it.

FLORENCE: Well, Nicky's been away for such ages.

THE VORTEX

Also, one must be in London for the season. You can't expect me to bury myself in the country indefinitely—I shall be there practically all through the spring and summer.

HELEN: Lovely tennis parties and cricket weeks and things——

FLORENCE: Certainly.

HELEN (*kissing her*): You're a divine creature, Florence.

FLORENCE (*basking*): Am I? (*The telephone rings.*) Hallo—yes—speaking. (*To HELEN in a whisper.*) It's Inez Zulieta, I never went to her recital. . . . Inez, *darling*, I never recognized your voice . . . didn't you get my note? . . . it was absolutely true, I was in agony. . . . Inez, don't be angry, if you only knew how I longed for the sound of your wonderful, wonderful voice . . . *darling*. . . . Inez, don't be so cruel . . . to-morrow, then. (*She hangs up receiver.*) I do wish Inez wasn't so persistent.

HELEN: You never stop encouraging her.

FLORENCE: Oh, Helen, I'm so tired of everyone.

HELEN: Except Tom?

FLORENCE: Yes, except Tom; he's such a darling.

HELEN: How do you think he and Nicky will get on?

FLORENCE: Marvellously—Tom loves music.

HELEN: He says he does.

FLORENCE: My dear, I took him to that Russian thing the other day and he sat entranced from beginning to end.

HELEN: Poor Nicky!

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: Why do you say that?

HELEN: Because I sometimes feel it.

FLORENCE (*suddenly furious*): Oh, I wonder why we're such friends—we're so opposite—you don't understand me a bit. I used to think you did, but you've been different lately—unsympathetic.

HELEN: No, I haven't.

FLORENCE: Yes, you have—over Tom—I believe you're in love with him yourself.

HELEN (*smiling*): No—it isn't that.

FLORENCE: Anyhow, you can't bear him being in love with me.

HELEN: I don't think he is—really. I quite realize that he *was* very violently infatuated, but that is wearing off a bit now. I'm beginning to see him as he is. . . .

FLORENCE: No, no, it's not true—you don't understand——

HELEN: We *are* friends, Florence, though we're so "opposite." Do you really know the truth—inside you? Or is all this shrill vanity real?

FLORENCE: What's the matter with you?

HELEN: You're ten years older than I am, but when I'm your age I shall be twenty years older than you.

FLORENCE: *Darling*, how deliciously involved—what *can* you mean by that?

HELEN: I mean, I think it's silly not to grow old when the time comes.

[*She rises and goes towards door.*]

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE (*outraged*): Helen! (*There is suddenly heard a violent knocking at the front door.*) What on earth is that?

[There is a noise outside, then the door bursts open and NICKY enters. He is extremely well dressed in travelling clothes. He is tall and pale, with thin, nervous hands.]

FLORENCE: Nicky.

NICKY: Mother.

[He embraces her.]

FLORENCE: But I'd no idea—I thought you were coming to-morrow.

NICKY: No, to-day—I wrote to you.

FLORENCE: I'm terribly, terribly excited.

NICKY: Helen, dear, how are you?

[He kisses her.]

HELEN: Splendid, Nicky.

FLORENCE: I can't get over your arriving like this. . . .
I never realized——

NICKY: Silly . . . you're looking awfully well.

FLORENCE: Am I?

NICKY: Wonderful, as usual.

FLORENCE: I was talking to George Morrison only last Thursday——

NICKY: The man who wrote that fearful book?

FLORENCE: It isn't a fearful book, it's brilliant—anyhow, he absolutely refused to believe that I had a grown-up son.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: My dears, I must fly.

NICKY: Don't go yet.

HELEN: I must—I'm hours late as it is.

NICKY: Be a little later, then.

FLORENCE: Remember, five o'clock train on Friday.

NICKY: Oh, is she coming down to the house—divine?

HELEN: Yes, if Florence is still speaking to me—good-bye.

[She goes out.]

NICKY: Have you been having a scene?

FLORENCE: No, dear.

NICKY: She's a darling—Helen——

FLORENCE: Extremely stupid and tactless sometimes.

NICKY: It doesn't feel as though I'd been away at all.

FLORENCE: I've missed you appallingly—we had such a short time together in Paris—did you enjoy all my letters?

NICKY: I adored them—so did John Bagot. I used to read most of them aloud to him. He's mad on you, saw your pictures in the "Tatler," or something, and fell in love with it.

FLORENCE: Is he nice?

NICKY: He's grand.

FLORENCE: We must all dine at the Embassy. When is he coming to England?

NICKY: Not until after Christmas.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: You must see my new photographs, they're wonderful.

[*She takes large packet from desk.*]

NICKY: It's heavenly—being back.

FLORENCE: Look.

NICKY: I don't like that one.

FLORENCE: How can you, Nicky!—Tom likes that one best of all.

NICKY: Who's Tom?

FLORENCE: Tom Veryan—he's a dear, you'll like him frightfully—you know—the very nicest type of Englishman.

NICKY: I hate the very nicest type of Englishman.

FLORENCE: Don't be tiresome, Nicky, he's only twenty-four, and they all think *so* well of him——

NICKY: All who?

FLORENCE: All his officers and people, he's in the Brigade.

NICKY (*holding photograph away from him and scrutinizing it through half-closed eyes*): Now that one really is *enchanting*—they've got your hair *beautifully*—Oh, yes, my dear, it's perfect——

FLORENCE (*complacently*): It *is* good—she's sweet—Madame Henderson, she simply won't hear of my paying for these—she says it's quite sufficient to be allowed to exhibit them in the window.

NICKY: Is anyone dining this evening?

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: No—Oh, dear, I'd forgotten—I'm dining out with Tom.

NICKY: Oh—I see.

FLORENCE: Your first night home, too—how perfectly fiendish. What a fool I am to have muddled it up.

NICKY: It doesn't matter, darling.

FLORENCE: Oh, but it *does*. I wonder if we could get another seat——

NICKY: Seat, what for?

FLORENCE: We're going to the first night of "The New Elaine," it's going to be marvellous.

NICKY: Who's in it?

FLORENCE: Nora Dean and Selwyn Steele——

NICKY: Oh, God!

FLORENCE: It's silly of you *always* to jeer at Selwyn Steele. He's a brilliant actor, if only he could get away from his wife. . . .

NICKY: I couldn't bear him to-night anyway, I'm tired. Is father home yet?

FLORENCE: No, I don't think so. Oh, I do feel such a beast——

NICKY: Don't be silly—honestly, I don't mind a bit.

FLORENCE: I know—you have a nice quiet dinner here and join us at the Embassy afterwards.

NICKY: Is it a late night?

FLORENCE: Yes, they play the most heavenly tune

THE VORTEX

there now—Tom always makes them do it over and over again—I'll put it on——

[She goes to the gramophone.]

NICKY: How's Iris?

FLORENCE: My dear, don't speak of her.

NICKY: Why—what's she done?

FLORENCE: She's been absolutely foul.

NICKY: In what way?

FLORENCE: Every way—I never trusted her, luckily—Thank God I've got instincts about people—listen, isn't this marvellous—She said the most filthy things to Gloria Craig about me—I always knew she was insanely jealous, but there are limits. I loathe being at people's beck and call. . . . Come and dance.

NICKY (*as they dance*): I'm sorry you've rowed—I rather liked her——

FLORENCE: Only because she kept on saying how wonderful you were. . . . She doesn't know a thing about music really.

NICKY: Oh, yes, she does.

FLORENCE: It's merely bluff—all that appreciation—*Darling*, how oddly you're dancing.

NICKY: It's probably because we haven't danced together for so long. . . .

FLORENCE: Anyhow, now she's gone off to Monte Carlo with Violet Fenchurch—silly fool——

[Enter DAVID LANCASTER. He is an elderly grey-haired pleasant man.]

THE VORTEX

DAVID (*delighted*): Nicky—my boy——

NICKY (*kissing him*): Hallo, father——

DAVID: I thought—Florence said—to-morrow——

NICKY: Mother muddled it up.

DAVID: You look rather tired.

NICKY: I'm splendid—how's everything?

DAVID: The same as usual. I've made lots of improvements down at the house.

FLORENCE: David thinks and talks of nothing but the farm——

DAVID: It's beginning to pay a bit—Peterson's an awfully good man.

NICKY: We'll make a grand tour of it on Sunday.

DAVID: Have you enjoyed yourself in Paris?

NICKY: Oh, yes, rather—it's a splendid place to work.

DAVID: It never struck me that way quite, but still——

FLORENCE: Sophie de Molignac said Nicky's playing had improved wonderfully.

DAVID: I'm so glad, Nicky.

NICKY: I've been doing some Spanish stuff lately.

DAVID: I wish I knew more about it.

NICKY: Never mind, father.

DAVID: Come to my room and talk, I can't bear that thing——

FLORENCE: Father's such a beast, he never will dance with me.

THE VORTEX

DAVID: Is the "Evening News" anywhere about?

NICKY: Yes, here.

[He gives it to him.]

DAVID: I'm so glad you're home again, Nicky—don't forget—come and talk. . . .

[He goes out.]

FLORENCE: David's so much happier in the country.

NICKY: Why on earth doesn't he retire and live at the house for good?

FLORENCE: Work has become such a habit with him—he's always hated giving up habits.

NICKY: Mother—I've got something rather important to tell you.

FLORENCE: Darling, how thrilling! What is it?

NICKY: I am engaged to be married.

FLORENCE: What!

NICKY: Practically—as much as one can be these days.

FLORENCE: Nicky!

NICKY: Don't look so stricken.

FLORENCE: But, Nicky—I never sort of visualized you being engaged, or married, or anything.

NICKY: Why not?

FLORENCE: You're not old enough.

NICKY: I'm twenty-four.

FLORENCE: You don't look it. . . . Thank God!

NICKY: What do you really feel about it, mother?

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: *Darling*—I hardly know what to say—you've sprung it on me so suddenly—who is she?

NICKY: A girl called Bunty Mainwaring.

FLORENCE: What a silly name!

NICKY: It isn't at all—it's very attractive.

FLORENCE: Is she an actress, or a student, or what?

NICKY: Neither—she is what is technically termed a "lady."

FLORENCE: Do you think she'll like me?

NICKY: She went mad over your photograph.

FLORENCE: Which one?

NICKY: The "looking out of the window" one.

FLORENCE: That really is one of the best I've ever had done.

NICKY: She said you had the face of an heroic little boy.

FLORENCE: What a *divine* thing to say!

[*She glances at herself in the glass.*]

NICKY: She does say divine things—she's supremely intelligent.

FLORENCE: Is she in Paris?

NICKY: No, she came over with me to-day.

FLORENCE: Where does she live?

NICKY: Just round the corner in Carbury Square.

FLORENCE: Near the Churchingtons.

NICKY: It's her mother's house, but her mother's

THE VORTEX

away just now, so I asked her to change quickly and come on here.

FLORENCE: Nicky!

NICKY: Why not? I wanted you to see her as soon as possible.

FLORENCE (*realizing parental responsibility*): It's an awful shock, you know.

NICKY: Nonsense, mother—you're quite excited about it, really.

FLORENCE (*with determination*): I shall be charming to her.

NICKY: Then she'll adore you at once—probably too much, and I shall be jealous.

FLORENCE: You'd better both dine here together and come on to the Embassy—how old is she?

NICKY: Twenty-three.

FLORENCE: What does she do?

NICKY: Nothing much—she writes things occasionally.

FLORENCE: Where did you meet her?

NICKY: First of all at a party at Olive Lloyd-Kennedy's.

FLORENCE: I can't bear Olive Lloyd-Kennedy—she's a cat.

NICKY: Then I met her again at Marion Fawcett's—a frightful sort of reception affair—she was staying with her

FLORENCE: She seems to move exclusively among my worst enemies—is she pretty?

THE VORTEX

NICKY: I don't know—I haven't really noticed.

FLORENCE (*with a touch of real feeling*): Nicky, darling, I do feel so extraordinary about it.

NICKY: Why extraordinary?

FLORENCE: It's a milestone, isn't it—you being engaged? A definite milestone? (*She catches sight of herself.*) Look at my nose. (*She powders it.*) I do hope she'll like me—I must go and dress now, Tom is fetching me half-past seven—bring her to my room when she comes.

NICKY: Don't go for a minute.

FLORENCE: I must, really—Tom will be furious.

NICKY: Oh, damn Tom!

FLORENCE: Oh, Nicky, *don't* go and take one of your tiresome prejudices against him.

NICKY (*smiling*): All right, I'll try not to.

FLORENCE: He's frightfully good-looking.

NICKY: Oh!

FLORENCE: And he adores music.

NICKY: Now, then, mother——

FLORENCE: He does, honestly.

NICKY: Good.

FLORENCE: And he dances beautifully.

NICKY: I shall never stop dancing with him.

FLORENCE: And he's so good at games.

NICKY: He sounds adorable.

FLORENCE: Of course, he needs knowing. .

THE VORTEX

NICKY: So do I.

FLORENCE: You will make an effort though, darling, won't you? For my sake!

NICKY: Yes, mother.

FLORENCE: And we'll all have a divine time together, Tom and me and you and what's her name——

NICKY: Bunty.

FLORENCE: Oh, yes, of course, Bunty

[Front door bell rings.]

NICKY: This is her, I expect.

FLORENCE: Do you feel wonderful about her?

NICKY: Yes.

FLORENCE: It is thrilling, isn't it—being in love?

NICKY (*frowning a little*): Yes.

FLORENCE: Your father was right—you look awfully tired, Nicky.

NICKY: What nonsense! I feel grand.

[Enter PRESTON.]

PRESTON (*announcing*): Miss Mainwaring.

[BUNTY comes in, very self-assured and well-dressed. She is more attractive than pretty in a boyish sort of way.]

[PRESTON goes out.]

NICKY: Bunty. You have been quick.

BUNTY: I've simply flown.

NICKY: Bunty . . . here is mother. . .

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: Oh!

FLORENCE (*taking both her hands*): This is frightfully exciting, isn't it?

[*She kisses her.*]

NICKY: I've told her.

BUNTY: Are you furious?

FLORENCE: Of course not—why should I be? Specially now.

BUNTY: It's absolutely incredible, you being Nicky's mother.

FLORENCE: Am I anything like you thought I'd be?

BUNTY: Yes, exactly—but I couldn't believe it until I saw you.

FLORENCE: Take off that perfectly divine cloak and have a cigarette—I've got to rush and dress now, because I'm *terribly* late, but you're dining here with Nicky and joining Tom Veryan and me at the Embassy afterwards.

BUNTY: Tom Veryan . . . ?

FLORENCE: Yes, do you know him?

BUNTY: I did when I was a child—if it's the same one.

[*She takes off her cloak.*]

FLORENCE (*effusively*): Nicky—I don't feel extraordinary about it any more—I'm *delighted*.

NICKY: Angel.

FLORENCE: Perhaps Bunty would like to come down to the house on Friday for the week-end?

NICKY: Oh, yes, marvellous.

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: It's awfully sweet of you, Mrs. Lancaster.

FLORENCE: You must call me Florence—I can't bear Mrs. Lancaster. I must fly, Tom will be here at any moment—that's him on the desk.

BUNTY (*going over to photograph*): Yes—it is the same one.

FLORENCE: How too divine! . . .

[*Telephone rings.*]

'Hallo—yes, speaking—Elsa, darling, how are you . . . What? . . . to-night . . . how perfectly heavenly, of course, I'd adore it . . . listen, Nicky's just back from Paris, can he come too with Bunty Mainwaring—yes, he's here.—See you to-night, dear. . . . Here, Nicky, talk to Elsa. . . .

[*She snatches up her hand-bag and fur coat and kisses BUNTY effusively.*]

I'm so glad about you and Nicky—it's too wonderful.

[*She rushes out.*]

NICKY (*at telephone*): Hallo, Elsa . . . I'd no idea you were in London. I'm terribly thrilled—my dear, you haven't . . . all those lovely tunes you played to me in Paris? . . . *how amazing*, I *am* glad . . . have you done anything with that Tango? . . . You must play it to-night, I want Bunty to hear it. . . . It is perfect, isn't it? . . . Good-bye, dear. (*He hangs up the receiver*)
Bunty.

BUNTY: What?

NICKY: I'm terribly happy.

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: So am I.

NICKY: Do you remember how we planned all this—coming home together—and breaking it to mother—and everything?

BUNTY: Rather.

NICKY: Do you really like her?

BUNTY: I adore her—she's a perfect angel.

NICKY: I told her your "heroic little boy" line—she loved it.

BUNTY: It's true, you know—rather defiant too—laughing at Fate.

NICKY: Doesn't Paris seem ages away now?

BUNTY: A different life altogether.

NICKY: That nasty little bit of channel is such an enormous gulf, really. Did you put that dress on on purpose.

BUNTY (*smiling*): Perhaps.

NICKY: You are a devil.

BUNTY: It's such fun being reminded of things.

NICKY: And such agony, too.

BUNTY: Nicky, darling—why agony?

NICKY: It's always agony being in love, and I started loving you in that dress.

BUNTY: Did you?

NICKY: Don't pretend you didn't know.

BUNTY: I suppose one always knows—really.

NICKY: From the very first moment.

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: Yes.

NICKY: A sort of spark.

BUNTY: Your playing helped a lot.

NICKY: I meant it to.

BUNTY: Calculating pig.

NICKY: Have a cigarette?

BUNTY: All right.

[He hands her box, and she takes one.]

NICKY (*lighting her cigarette*): I wish we weren't so free.

BUNTY: Why? What do you mean?

NICKY: I feel I should like to elope, or something violently romantic like that.

BUNTY (*laughing*): There wouldn't be much point in it now, would there?

NICKY: Perhaps not. How much do you love me?

BUNTY: I don't know.

NICKY: It's fun analysing one's emotions.

BUNTY: Marvellous fun.

NICKY: And a comfort, too, when things go wrong—but it kills sentiment stone dead.

BUNTY: A good job too.

NICKY: You're frightfully hard, Bunty.

BUNTY: Am I?

NICKY: Much harder than me—really.

BUNTY: You've got so much hysteria.

THE VORTEX

NICKY: I can't help it.

BUNTY: Of course not, it's your temperament. You burst out suddenly.

NICKY: Not so badly as I used to.

BUNTY: You're growing older.

NICKY: God, yes; isn't it foul?

BUNTY: Hell, my dear.

NICKY: It's funny how mother's generation always longed to be old when they were young, and we strain every nerve to keep young.

BUNTY: That's because we see what's coming so much more clearly.

NICKY: Wouldn't it be terrible to know *exactly*—I feel frightened sometimes.

BUNTY: Why?

NICKY: We're all so hectic and nervy. . . .

BUNTY: It doesn't matter—it probably only means we shan't live so long. . . .

NICKY (*suddenly*): Shut up—shut up. . . .

[*Enter* PRESTON.

PRESTON (*announcing*): Mr. Veryan.

[*Enter* TOM. NICKY greets him and shakes hands.
Exit PRESTON.

NICKY: How are you?—I'm Nicky—I came over to-day instead of to-morrow. . . .

TOM: Oh!

NICKY: Do you know Bunty Mainwaring?

THE VORTEX

TOM: Bunty—I say—I am glad.

[They shake hands warmly.]

NICKY: We'd better have some cocktails.

[He goes to the door and shouts.]

PRESTON . . . bring us some cocktails. . . .

TOM: This *is* jolly—I didn't know what had become of you.

BUNTY: I've been living in Paris a good deal.

TOM: How many years ago is it since we . . .

BUNTY: During the War—the last time I saw you, you were at Sandhurst.

NICKY: Such a pretty place.

TOM: You've hardly altered a bit—more grown up, of course.

NICKY: All this is most affecting.

TOM: Bunty and I used to know one another awfully well.

NICKY: What fun!

BUNTY (*warningly*): Nicky . . .

NICKY: But it is—it's thrilling—there's nothing so charming as a reunion.

BUNTY: Nicky and I have been travelling all day. . . . Boats and trains get on his nerves. . . .

NICKY: When the cocktails come, tell Preston to bring mine to me in father's room.

BUNTY: Nicky, don't be so silly.

THE VORTEX

NICKY: Surely it's not silly to want to talk to my aged father after a year's debauch in Paris? I fail to see why you should have the monopoly of reunions.

BUNTY: Well, don't be long.

TOM: Cheerio!

NICKY (*crossly*): Oh, God!

[*He goes out.*]

TOM: What's up?

BUNTY: These temperamental musicians.

TOM: Silly ass.

BUNTY: He isn't really—he's only jealous.

TOM: Why . . . is he . . . ?

BUNTY: We're by way of being engaged.

TOM: What?

BUNTY: Why not?

TOM: Are you . . . are you in love with him?

BUNTY (*lightly*): Yes—isn't it damnable?

TOM: Good Lord!

[*He laughs.*]

BUNTY: What are you laughing at?

TOM: It seems so funny you being in love with that sort of chap.

BUNTY: What do you mean by "that sort of chap"?

TOM: Oh—I don't know, that type seems so unlike you.

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: Type?

TOM: Yes, you know—up in the air—effeminate.

BUNTY: You're more bucolic than you used to be, Tom.

TOM: Here, I say . . .

[Enter PRESTON with cocktails.]

BUNTY: Will you please take Mr. Nicky's in to him in his father's room?

PRESTON: Yes, miss.

TOM: Is Mrs. Lancaster nearly ready?

PRESTON: I think so, sir.

TOM: Ask her to hurry—we shall be late.

PRESTON: Yes, sir.

[He goes out.]

BUNTY: I can laugh now.

[She does so.]

TOM: Why?

BUNTY: I've just realized something.

TOM: What?

BUNTY: We shall meet again—over the week-end.

TOM: Are you coming down to the house?

BUNTY: Yes.

TOM: That's splendid—come for a tramp Sunday morning and we'll talk.

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: What about?

TOM: Oh, lots of things—old times.

BUNTY (*lifting her cocktail*): Old times, Tom.

TOM (*doing the same*): Cheerio!

CURTAIN

ACT II

ACT II

The scene is the hall of MRS. LANCASTER'S house, about forty miles from London.

When the curtain rises it is just after dinner on the Sunday of the week-end party—the gramophone is going, and there is a continual buzz of conversation. CLARA HIBBERT, an emaciated soprano, is dancing with TOM VERYAN, HELEN with PAWNIE, and NICKY with BUNTY. FLORENCE is seated on the club fender talking intellectually with BRUCE FAIRLIGHT, an earnest dramatist, the squalor of whose plays is much appreciated by those who live in comparative luxury.

There must be a feeling of hectic amusement and noise, and the air black with cigarette smoke and superlatives. During the first part of the scene everyone must appear to be talking at once, but the actual lines spoken while dancing must be timed to reach the audience as the speakers pass near the footlights. This scene will probably be exceedingly difficult to produce, but is absolutely indispensable.

HELEN: It's much too fast, Nicky.

TOM: Do slow down a bit.

NICKY: It's the pace that's marked on the record.

PAWNIE: I've never danced well since the War, I don't know why.

FLORENCE: But your last act was so strong, when she came in half mad with fright and described everything minutely.

BRUCE: I try to write as *honestly* as possible.

THE VORTEX

CLARA: I gave her three for manners, but seven for charm, because I had to be a *little* nice!

TOM: I thought she was rather a decent sort.

BUNTY: No, but really, Nicky, his technique completely annihilated his inspiration.

NICKY: Not with Debussy and Ravel, with the older Masters, yes; but he's probably tired of them.

BUNTY: That's so stupid, I think.

HELEN: My dear, it was the most "Chic" thing you've ever seen, but unfortunately the wrong colour.

PAWNIE: Marion Ferris had that Poirer model copied in the most frightful blue!

CLARA: I believe my shoe's coming off.

TOM: Shall we stop?

CLARA: No, it's all right.

FLORENCE: I wonder if you could gouge this cigarette-end out of the holder for me?

BRUCE: I'll try. (*He does so.*) I always smoke a pipe when I'm working.

FLORENCE: How soothing!

BUNTY: I suppose one can never really judge properly from a recital.

NICKY: Not with him, because he's not dramatic enough.

BUNTY: Dramatic pianists make me uncomfortable.

HELEN: Pawnie, your tongue grows more venomous every day.

THE VORTEX

PAWNIE (*giggling*): Well, I had to say something—anyhow, it was true.

HELEN: Especially about her ankles.

PAWNIE: My dear, yes!

[*They both laugh.*]

[*The record comes to an end, and NICKY begins to change it. Everyone talks and laughs.*]

CLARA: You must come next Sunday week.

TOM: Thanks awfully, I'd love to.

CLARA: I'm only singing ballads, but you know what Sunday concerts are.

TOM: Oh, yes, rather.

CLARA (*to NICKY*): What's on the other side?

NICKY: "You've got the cutest ears and eyes and nose."

PAWNIE: Do put on "Spoony Moon 'in Upper Carolina."

HELEN: No, don't put it on, Nicky, play it yourself; you always make the gramophone go too quickly.

BUNTY: Yes, go on, Nicky.

FLORENCE (*refusing BRUCE's offer of a cigarette*): No, thanks, not another—I'm dancing with Tom.

BUNTY (*gaily*): Missing one, Tom.

TOM: Righto!

[*NICKY commences to play a foxtrot.*]

BUNTY (*dragging BRUCE to his feet*): Come on, Mr. Fairlight, don't overdo the serious dramatist stunt!

THE VORTEX

BRUCE: I warn you I'm no good.

[He dances with her, and confirms the truth of his warning. CLARA HIBBERT squashes down on the piano-seat next to NICKY and endeavours with one finger in the treble to follow the tune he is playing. HELEN and PAWNIE stand right down close to the footlights, smoking and talking, their backs are half-turned to the audience, but their remarks must be perfectly audible.]

HELEN: Tom Veryan doesn't dance as well as he thinks he does.

PAWNIE: With that figure he ought to be marvellous.

HELEN: He's too athletic.

PAWNIE: Anyhow, I'm sure he's a success at the Bath Club.

HELEN: Doesn't Florence look astounding?

PAWNIE: Absolutely. She knows exactly what suits her.

HELEN: Where's David?

PAWNIE: He went off to his study to smoke.

HELEN: I do wish Florence wouldn't be irritable with him in front of everybody. I felt acutely uncomfortable at dinner.

PAWNIE: It makes Nicky furious as a rule, but to-night he was too occupied with that stupid little fool Bunt Mainwaring to take any notice.

HELEN: She's an excellent type.

PAWNIE: Very average; I only hope nothing will come of Nicky's mania for her.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: I don't think we need worry.

PAWNIE: Why?

HELEN: Wait and see, my dear.

CLARA (*leaving NICKY at the piano and advancing on PAWNIE*): Come and dance, Pawnie, and tell me how divinely I sang on Tuesday.

PAWNIE (*agreeably*): You didn't.

CLARA: Ten for cruelty.

[*They start to dance. HELEN moves over to the mantelpiece for a cigarette.*]

HELEN: Have you a match, Nicky?

NICKY: Isn't this a marvellous tune?

HELEN: Fascinating! (*She goes over and sits next to him. Gently slipping her hand into his coat pocket.*) Darling, I do want a match. (*She brings out a little box.*) What a divine little box!

[*NICKY stops playing and jumps up.*]

NICKY (*violently*): Helen, give that to me——!

[*Everyone stops dancing.*]

CLARA: Nicky, dear, *don't* be tiresome.

NICKY (*recovering himself*): I'm sick of playing, let's have the gramophone again. (*To HELEN.*) Here's a light, dearie.

[*He takes match-box out of another pocket and lights HELEN's cigarette. She looks at him queerly for a moment, then he restarts the gramophone and everyone begins to dance again except HELEN and BRUCE FAIRLIGHT. HELEN goes over to the fireplace and takes a coffee-cup from the mantelpiece.*]

THE VORTEX

HELEN: Whose coffee is this? Someone drank mine, and I'd hardly touched it.

BRUCE: If it has no sugar in it, it's mine.

HELEN (*draining it*): It had no sugar in it.

FLORENCE: You're dancing abominably, Tom.

TOM: Oh, am I?

FLORENCE: What's the matter with you?

TOM: I don't know, I suppose I'm tired.

FLORENCE: You're not usually tired when you're dancing with me.

TOM: Oh, Florence, don't nag!

FLORENCE: How dare you speak to me like that?

[*She stops dancing and goes over to the fireplace.*]

TOM (*following her*): I say, Florence—I'm sorry——

PAWNIE: Let's stop the music for a moment and think of something really marvellous to do.

BUNTY: No, let's go on dancing.

CLARA: I'm exhausted.

PAWNIE (*stopping the gramophone*): What was that divine game we played coming back from Paris, Helen?

HELEN: Just ordinary "Clumps," wasn't it?

BUNTY: I loathe "Clumps."

NICKY: What about the History game?

BRUCE: What's that?

BUNTY: Oh, no, Nicky, it's too intellectual.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: There's a Mah-jong set in the drawing-room.

PAWNIE: How divine!—let's make up a table immediately.

CLARA: I won't be happy until someone gives me a set made entirely of jade.

NICKY: Come on, Bunty.

BUNTY (*looking at Tom*): I can't play it.

NICKY: You can; you used to play in Paris with Yvonne.

BUNTY: I've forgotten it.

NICKY: You'll soon remember again.

[*He drags her off.*]

PAWNIE: Come along, Clara.

CLARA: I insist on Mr. Fairlight learning.

BRUCE: I'm afraid I'm no good at that sort of thing.

CLARA: You'll be able to put it in one of your plays.

PAWNIE: Come and watch, it's too thrilling for words.

[*CLARA, BRUCE and PAWNIE go off.*]

HELEN: Have you only one set, Florence?

FLORENCE: Yes, isn't it maddening? Clara promised to bring her's down but forgot.

HELEN: Does Bruce Fairlight play Bridge?

FLORENCE: No, I don't think so.

HELEN: Dramatists are such a comfort in a house-party, aren't they?

[*She goes off.*]

THE VORTEX

TOM: Are you coming, Florence?

FLORENCE: No.

TOM (*nonplussed*): Oh!

FLORENCE: But please don't let me stop *you* going, I'm sure you're *dying* to be with the others.

TOM: I say, Florence, I wish you wouldn't go on like that.

FLORENCE: I don't know what's the matter with you, you've never behaved like this before.

TOM: I haven't behaved like anything.

FLORENCE: You've been exceedingly rude to me, both at dinner and afterwards.

TOM: I wasn't at dinner.

FLORENCE: Yes, you were; you snapped me up when I said I didn't like Elsie Saunders.

TOM: You know perfectly well she's a friend of mine.

FLORENCE: Well, she oughtn't to be, after the things she's said about me.

TOM: You will go on imagining.

FLORENCE: Nothing of the sort—I *know*! If you weren't so dense you'd see, too—the jealousy I have to put up with. I get so tired of it all, so desperately tired.

[*She becomes a little pathetic.*]

TOM: Talk about being different, you're different too——

FLORENCE: I'm unhappy.

TOM: Why?

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: Because I hate to see you being put against me.

TOM: Florence!

FLORENCE: You'll understand one day. They're all very subtle, but I can see.

TOM: Nobody's said a word to me about you, they'd better not try.

FLORENCE: Why, what would you do?

TOM: I'd—I'd be furious.

FLORENCE: Oh!

TOM: And I'd let them see it, too.

FLORENCE (*holding out her hands*): Tom——

TOM: Yes?

FLORENCE: I forgive you.

TOM: I can't bear you being angry with me.

FLORENCE: Can't you, really?

TOM: It makes me feel beastly.

FLORENCE: Come and sit here.

TOM (*sitting next to her on the club fender*): That's a lovely dress.

FLORENCE: It is sweet, isn't it?

TOM: You always wear wonderful clothes.

FLORENCE: Do I, Tom?

TOM: You know you do.

FLORENCE: Do you remember the very first time we met?

THE VORTEX

TOM: Rather.

FLORENCE: Oxford's so full of romance, isn't it?

TOM: It was when you came down.

FLORENCE: Thank you, Tom, dear.

TOM: We did have fun.

FLORENCE: You used to come up to *matinées*, and I'd motor you back afterwards.

TOM: Ripping!

FLORENCE: That reminds me, I've got seats for "Rolling Stones" on Tuesday—don't forget.

TOM: You never said you were going to get them.

FLORENCE: It doesn't matter, I thought I did. We'd better dine at Claridges.

TOM: But, Florence, I—I can't come!

FLORENCE: Why not?

TOM: I promised to go out.

FLORENCE: Who with?

TOM: Mother.

FLORENCE: Can't you put her off, it will be such a good first night?

TOM: Well—you see, as a matter of fact—it's rather awkward—I put her off the other day——

[*There is a slight pause.*]

FLORENCE (*a trifle coldly*): Oh, well, never mind, we'll go some other night.

[*Enter DAVID.*]

THE VORTEX

DAVID: Hallo, Florence, I thought you were in the drawing-room.

FLORENCE: They're playing Mah-jong, and there's only one set. I shall break in presently.

TOM: I'll just go and see how they're getting on.

[This obvious excuse for getting out of the room is not lost upon FLORENCE.]

FLORENCE: Yes, do.

TOM: Come and play soon.

[He goes out quietly.]

FLORENCE: Don't you think this is a divine frock?

DAVID: Very pretty.

FLORENCE: You and Helen seemed to be very thick at dinner. What were you talking about?

DAVID: Nothing much—I like Helen.

FLORENCE: Only because she flatters you and listens to everything you say.

DAVID: She doesn't flatter me.

FLORENCE: I suppose she was talking about the farm, and giving her opinions.

DAVID: We did discuss the farm a little.

FLORENCE: She doesn't know a thing about it, really.

DAVID: Perhaps not, but it passed the time.

[He goes out.]

[FLORENCE sits still for a moment, then she wearily buries her face in her hands. Enter NICKY.]

NICKY (*going to her*): What's the matter, darling?

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: Nothing, I've got a slight headache.

NICKY: Why don't you go Byes?

FLORENCE: I can't, it's much too early.

NICKY: I'm sick of Mah-jong.

FLORENCE: Who's playing now?

NICKY: Pawnie and Helen and Clara are trying to teach Bruce Fairlight, he's an awful fool at it.

[He sits down at the piano and plays absently.]

FLORENCE: You must get Bunty out of that habit of contradicting everything people say.

NICKY: I don't see why.

FLORENCE: It's bad breeding.

NICKY (*striking a note viciously*): Who cares nowadays? We've all got a right to our opinions.

FLORENCE: She seems to forget that I'm much older than she is.

TOM: That's no argument, mother; it's silly only to remember your age when someone says something you don't like.

FLORENCE: She's having a bad effect on you.

NICKY: Nonsense!

FLORENCE: You've changed since Paris.

NICKY: Naturally.

FLORENCE: You never used to be rude to me.

NICKY: Oh, damn, I'm not rude.

FLORENCE: Yes, you are,

THE VORTEX

NICKY: Well, don't start running down Bunty.

FLORENCE: Stop playing—stop playing!

NICKY (*getting up angrily*): Oh, God!

[*He goes towards door and collides with HELEN.*]

HELEN: What's happening?

FLORENCE: Nothing, Bunty's just putting Nicky against me. I knew she'd try to.

[*She goes out.*]

HELEN: You must be having a delightful evening! You leave the drawing-room having rowed with Bunty, and come here and row with Florence.

NICKY: Mother's impossible.

HELEN: She's no different from what she's always been.

NICKY: Well, I haven't realized it before.

HELEN (*taking a cigarette and lighting it*): You haven't been engaged before.

NICKY: I'm hating this house-party.

HELEN (*lightly*): Don't say that, dear, it's not kind.

NICKY: You know I don't mean you.

HELEN: Are you very much in love?

NICKY: Yes.—No.—I don't know.

HELEN: I wonder.

NICKY: It's utterly devastating, anyhow.

HELEN: When did you meet her?

NICKY: About five months ago.

HELEN: What was she doing in Paris?

THE VORTEX

NICKY: Oh, I don't know—fooling about.

HELEN: Splendid.

NICKY: She's been studying French literature.

HELEN: Why?

NICKY: She's going to write—herself—some day.

HELEN: Oh, I see!

NICKY: Helen, do you like her?

HELEN: I can't tell yet—yesterday was the first time I'd ever set eyes on her.

NICKY: She's wonderfully intelligent.

HELEN: Yes—I'm sure she is.

NICKY: You *don't* like her?

HELEN: I tell you—I'm not sure yet.

NICKY: It's generally the way—one's friends always hate one another.

HELEN (*smiling*): It *is* difficult for you, isn't it?

NICKY: I should so like you to like her.

HELEN: Very well—I'll try.

NICKY: She's utterly opposite to me in every way.

HELEN: Yes, I see that.

NICKY: But that's as it ought to be, isn't it?

HELEN: It depends.

NICKY: I need a sort of restraining influence terribly.

HELEN: Yes, Nicky.

NICKY: She's awfully good for me.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: Is she?

NICKY: Yes—she curbs me when I get temperamental and silly.

HELEN: I always felt you needed encouraging more than curbing.

NICKY (*laughing*): Oh, Helen—aren't you a darling!

HELEN: I mean it.

NICKY: You're wrong, though—I'm all over the place.

HELEN: Anyhow, I do hope you'll be very happy with her.

NICKY: I don't suppose I shall ever be that—I haven't got the knack.

HELEN: Do you work hard?

NICKY: Yes.

HELEN: Really hard?

NICKY: Frightfully.

HELEN: Liar!

NICKY: If you'd seen me in Paris—studying, studying—all night long until the grey dawn put the guttering candle to shame—and my nerveless hands dropped from the keys——

HELEN: Candles gutter awfully quickly when they're burnt at both ends.

NICKY: Meaning that I look a debauched wreck of my former self?

HELEN: Exactly.

NICKY: If you go on encouraging me at this rate I shall commit suicide.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: You do resent anyone taking a real interest in you, don't you?

NICKY: I distrust it.

HELEN: Why?

NICKY: I don't know—I'm not worth it.

HELEN: You seem to be suffering from a slight inferiority complex.

NICKY: Not a bit of it—I'm gay and witty and handsome.

HELEN: Oh, Nicky, you're so maddening.

NICKY: Don't be cross, Helen.

HELEN: I'm one of the few people who know what you're really like, and you won't give me the credit for it

NICKY: Do you think you do, honestly?

HELEN: Yes—and I'm exceedingly worried about you.

NICKY: You needn't be.

HELEN: You're sensitive and reserved and utterly foolish.

NICKY: Thank you—I'm beginning to feel beautifully picturesque.

HELEN: And you're scared.

NICKY: Why! What have I to be scared about?

HELEN: Would you like me to tell you?

NICKY: No.

HELEN: Why not?

NICKY: Because you're a sentimentalist, and you see things that aren't there at all.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: You're far more sentimental than I.

NICKY: Darling Helen—you've got such a lovely mind—like a Christmas card—with frosted robins and sheep wandering about in the snow—bleating.

HELEN: All the same, I should give up drugs if I were you.

NICKY: Helen!

HELEN: Well?

NICKY: I don't know what you mean.

HELEN: Do you think I can't see?

NICKY (*forcing a laugh*): You're being terribly funny, aren't you?

HELEN: You fool! You unutterable little fool!

NICKY: Don't be dramatic, dear.

HELEN: I thought you had common sense; I credited you with more intelligence than that.

NICKY: If you persist in being absurd.

HELEN (*suddenly with intense feeling*): Nicky, don't resist me, don't fight me, I'm your friend, I wouldn't have said a word if I weren't. You've got to stop it; you haven't gone very far yet, there's still time—for God's sake listen to reason.

NICKY: Shut up, shut up, don't speak so loudly.

HELEN: Nicky, throw it away.

NICKY: When did you find out?

HELEN: To-night, you know, when you were playing, but I've guessed for ages.

THE VORTEX

NICKY: You needn't be frightened, Helen, I only take just the tiniest little bit, once in a blue moon!

HELEN: If anything goes wrong, you'll take a lot—throw it away.

NICKY: What could go wrong?

HELEN: Never mind, throw it away!

NICKY: I can't—look out, somebody's coming.

[*Enter DAVID.*

DAVID: Hallo!

NICKY: Hallo, father!

DAVID: What's the matter?

NICKY: The matter—why?

DAVID: You look very worried.

NICKY: Helen and I have just had a grand heart-to-heart talk; we've undone our back hair, loosened our stays and wallowed in it.

DAVID: Oh, I see!

HELEN: We haven't seen one another for so long—it was inevitable.

DAVID: You never came and looked at the Farm this morning—I waited for you.

NICKY: I'm awfully sorry, father—I just went on sleeping.

HELEN: I'll see you later, Nicky.

NICKY: All right.

[*HELEN goes out.*

THE VORTEX

DAVID: How do you think your mother's looking?

NICKY: Splendid—the same as ever.

DAVID: Would you like a cigar?

NICKY: No thanks, father—I'm not very good at them.

DAVID: I was just on my way to bed—there are far too many people in the house.

NICKY (*smiling*): You must be used to that by now.

DAVID: You ought to stay down here, you know—during the week and get some fresh air.

NICKY: I've got such millions of things to do in London.

DAVID: Worth doing?

NICKY: Yes, of course.

DAVID: You look as though you needed a rest.

NICKY: You needn't worry about me—I feel splendid.

DAVID: She seems a nice girl.

NICKY: Who—Bunty?

DAVID: Yes. Quiet and untiresome.

NICKY: She's a darling!

DAVID: When do you propose to get married?

NICKY: I don't know—the engagement's only a sort of try out, you know.

DAVID: Oh, I see—I didn't realize that—I'm so unversed in modern technicalities.

NICKY: It's her idea really—just to tread water for a bit.

DAVID: It sounds an excellent plan.

NICKY: I'm awfully glad you like her.

THE VORTEX

DAVID: Is she musical?

NICKY: Oh, yes—frightfully!

DAVID: Good!

NICKY: Father, I think I will come down here for a few days—and work quietly.

DAVID: If you do that I'll only go up to London every other day—I see so little of you when you're at the flat.

NICKY: That's settled then. I wonder what mother will say!

DAVID: I'll talk to her.

NICKY: All right—she won't bother about us much.

DAVID: No—I don't suppose she will—I think I'll be getting along to bed now. Good night, my boy!

NICKY: Good night, father!

[They shake hands, and DAVID pats NICKY's shoulder rather tentatively. He goes upstairs and NICKY wanders to the piano. He plays absently, and BUNTY enters.]

BUNTY: I want to talk to you.

NICKY (*still playing*): All right.

BUNTY: Perhaps you'd stop playing for a minute.

NICKY: Won't you let me woo you with a little Scriabine?

BUNTY: Please stop.

NICKY (*rising*): I'm unappreciated—that's what it is.

[There is a slight pause—he goes over to her.]

I say, Bunty——

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: What?

NICKY: Before you say anything awful to me, I *am* sorry for being rude just now.

BUNTY: So you ought to be.

NICKY: Will you forgive me?

BUNTY: Yes, I forgive you.

NICKY: I've been irritable all the evening.

BUNTY: Give me a cigarette, Nicky.

NICKY: Here.

[*They both smoke.*]

BUNTY: Thanks.

NICKY: What did you want to talk to me about?

BUNTY: Lots of things—Us!

NICKY (*hardening*): Oh, I see!

BUNTY: Don't you think it's rather silly—being engaged?

NICKY: No, not at all.

BUNTY: I do.

NICKY: Just because we bickered a bit to-night?

BUNTY: No, not only because of that.

NICKY: Why then?

BUNTY: Can't you see?

NICKY: No.

BUNTY: Well, we're not very suited to one another, are we?

NICKY: Why do you suddenly say that?

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: Because I've only just realized it.

NICKY: I'm sorry.

BUNTY: It's not your fault particularly.

NICKY: I'm glad.

BUNTY: It's circumstances and surroundings.

NICKY: Oh, that can be altered quite easily. We'll change the shape of the house—we'll take all that wall away and turn that into a studio—you love studios, don't you?—then we'll transform the drawing-room into an enormous aviary.

BUNTY: It's practically that now!

NICKY: And then we'll——

BUNTY: Shut up, Nicky!

NICKY: I'm only trying to be amenable.

BUNTY: Are you, really?

NICKY: Yes, I'm putting up a sort of defence, Bunty. I have a feeling that you're going to be unpleasant, and I want to establish myself comfortably before you start.

BUNTY: I don't want to be unpleasant—only honest.

NICKY: You won't let the two run together, will you?

BUNTY (*with vehemence*): You're hopeless, hopeless, hopeless!

NICKY: Yes—I think I am rather.

BUNTY: In a way I'm glad—it makes it easier.

NICKY: Does it?

BUNTY: You're not in love with me, really—you couldn't be!

THE VORTEX

NICKY: Please, don't say that.

BUNTY: Why don't you face things properly?

NICKY: One generally has to in the end—I like to put it off for as long as possible.

BUNTY: That's cowardly.

NICKY: Don't be pompous, darling.

BUNTY: You're a great help, I must say.

NICKY: Why should I help to destroy my own happiness?

BUNTY: That's self-pity and self-deception.

NICKY: Why are you going on like this?

BUNTY: Because I tell you—I've realized the truth.

NICKY: I suppose you've taken a hatred to mother!

BUNTY: No, not a hatred.

NICKY: You don't like her.

BUNTY: Not very much.

NICKY: Why not? She likes you.

BUNTY: She detests me.

NICKY: Nonsense, why should she?

BUNTY: Because I'm young.

NICKY: What a filthy thing to say!

BUNTY: It's true.

NICKY: It's nothing of the sort.

BUNTY: You're so stupid sometimes.

NICKY: Thank you.

BUNTY: Don't let's start bickering again.

THE VORTEX

NICKY: We won't discuss mother any more then.

BUNTY: You started it.

NICKY: I wish I could make you understand her like I do—I mean she's awfully irritating, I know—but deep down she's marvellous in spite of everything.

BUNTY (*coldly*): Everything?

NICKY (*vehemently*): Yes, *everything*! Don't be a beast, Bunty, just try to see her point a little, even if you do dislike her. She is terribly silly about being "young" I know, but she's been used to so much admiration and flattery and everything always, she feels she sort of can't give it up—you do see that, don't you? And she hasn't really anything in the least comforting to fall back upon, she's not clever—real kind of brain cleverness—and father's no good, and I'm no good, and all the time she's wanting life to be as it was instead of as it is. There's no harm in her anywhere—she's just young inside. Can't you imagine the utter foulness of growing old? Specially if you've been lovely and attractive like she was. The beautiful Flo Lancaster! She used to be known as that—I can remember her when I was quite small, coming up to say good night to me, looking too perfectly radiant for words—and she used to come to the school, too, sometimes, and everyone used to go mad over her, and I used to get frightfully proud and excited——

BUNTY: I've never heard you talk like this before.

NICKY: I don't think I ever have.

BUNTY: I like you better clear cut, not blurred by sentiment.

[NICKY *looks at her for a moment in amazement.*]

THE VORTEX

NICKY: To describe you as hard would be inadequate—you're metallic!

BUNTY: I can see straight.

NICKY (*politely*): Can you?

BUNTY: Yes. We could never be happy together.

NICKY: Perhaps not.

BUNTY: Shall we just—finish—then?

NICKY: Certainly, I'm sorry we were too modern to have an engagement ring, you'd have been able to give it back to me so beautifully.

BUNTY: Don't be ridiculous!

NICKY: Better than being blurred by sentiment.

[BUNTY *lights another cigarette and, kicking off her shoes, perches on the club-fender and proceeds to warm her feet at the fire.*

[*Enter* CLARA HIBBERT.

CLARA: My dear, I'm *shattered*—and I'm going straight to bed—probably for several weeks.

BUNTY: Why?

CLARA: Shshsh! He's coming.

BUNTY: Who's coming?

CLARA: Bruce Fairlight—I've been teaching him Mah-jong—these master brains—agony, dear——

[*Enter* BRUCE FAIRLIGHT.

BRUCE: Very interesting, that game.

CLARA (*weakly*): I thought you'd like it.

THE VORTEX

BRUCE: It's interesting *psychologically*! The concentration and suspense——

[Enter FLORENCE, HELEN, PAWNIE and TOM.
TOM is grasping a whiskey and soda—PAWNIE is eating a biscuit.

PAWNIE: I'm quite exhausted—it must be the country air——

FLORENCE: —it was too lovely, because I started with two red dragons in my hand——

HELEN: I wondered who had them——

PAWNIE: One more tune, Nicky, before we go to bed——

FLORENCE: Yes, just one——

NICKY (*looking at BUNTY*): I'll play "I love you"—such a romantic tune.

[*He puts on the gramophone.*

BUNTY: Do.

HELEN: What time's everyone going up in the morning?

FLORENCE: The ten o'clock's the best—we'll have breakfast at nine downstairs.

PAWNIE (*confidentially*): Do you know that in London I can never do more than nibble a piece of thin toast, and whenever I'm away I eat *enormously*!

NICKY: How very peculiar!

PAWNIE: Your tone revolts me, Nicky—you must never be irascible with your old friends.

NICKY: I haven't got any.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: Nicky!

NICKY: Sorry, Helen.

FLORENCE: I don't know what's the matter with Nicky—he's been in a vile temper all the evening—his first week-end home, too.

NICKY: Such a pity, when so much trouble has been taken to make me happy and cosy.

TOM: Come and dance, Bunty.

BUNTY: No, not now.

NICKY: Dance with him, Bunty—chaps must have exercise.

FLORENCE: You dance with Bunty, Pawnie—I'll dance with Tom—come on.

[She and TOM dance.]

HELEN: The great thing in this world is not to be obvious, Nicky—over *anything*!

[FLORENCE and TOM dance, also HELEN and PAWNIE. Everyone talks at once, as in the beginning of the act.]

PAWNIE: You are infuriating, Helen—it's a wonderful book.

HELEN: Thoroughly second-rate.

PAWNIE: What do you think about "Mischievous Passion," Fairlight?

BRUCE: I never read novels on principle.

PAWNIE: Well, you must read this—it's colossal.

HELEN: Don't be led away by Pawnie, Mr. Fairlight, he has no discrimination.

THE VORTEX

PAWNIE: But I tell you it's brilliant! Absolutely brilliant!

HELEN: Nonsense.

PAWNIE: There are times, Helen, when I could willingly see you dead at my feet.

FLORENCE: A little slower, for Heaven's sake!

NICKY: How's that?

[He makes it far too slow.]

FLORENCE: I think you'd better go to bed, Nicky.

HELEN: We're all going, anyhow.

NICKY: Not yet, please, Mummy dear—I'm having such a lovely time!

[He slams off in a rage.]

PAWNIE: I always knew the Continent was fatal for the young.

BUNTY: Nicky's upset—it's my fault—we're not engaged any more.

FLORENCE: Why—what's happened?

BUNTY: Nothing happened—it was never very serious, really.

HELEN: I had a feeling that it was.

BUNTY: You were wrong.

FLORENCE: Well, I must say it's all been rather abrupt.

BUNTY: It's better to finish things off at once—cleanly—if you're not quite sure, don't you think?

FLORENCE: Well, I'm sorry, Bunty—if you feel like that about it there's nothing more to be said.

THE VORTEX

BUNTY: I wouldn't have mentioned it at all—only you all seemed to be blaming him for being irritable——

HELEN: Poor Nicky!

CLARA: I really must go up to bed now. I'm so tired. Good night, Florence dear.

FLORENCE: Good night, Clara. Breakfast at nine. Have you got books and everything you want?

CLARA: Yes, thanks. Good night, everyone.

[Everyone murmurs good night politely.]

FLORENCE: Tom, be an angel and fetch me a glass of milk—it's in the drawing-room.

TOM: All right.

[He goes off.]

HELEN: Come on up, Florence, I'm dead.

FLORENCE: So am I. Will you turn out the lights when you come?

PAWNIE: With beautiful precision, dear.

FLORENCE (*as she and HELEN go upstairs*): Tell Tom to bring my milk up to me, somebody.

PAWNIE: All right.

FLORENCE: Good night, Mr. Fairlight.

BRUCE: Good night.

PAWNIE: Good night, Florence.

[FLORENCE and HELEN go off.]

BRUCE: I suppose we'd all better go up.

BUNTY: I don't feel I could sleep yet.

[Re-enter TOM with glass of milk.]

THE VORTEX

TOM: Hallo! where's Florence?

BUNTY: Gone up to bed—will you take her milk to her?

PAWNIE: What's become of Nicky?

TOM: In the smoking-room, I think.

BRUCE: Good night, Miss Mainwaring.

BUNTY: Good night.

[They shake hands.]

PAWNIE: I shall come, too—good night.

TOM: Good night.

PAWNIE (*to BRUCE as they go upstairs*): When you're writing, do your characters grow as you go along?

BRUCE: No, I think each one out minutely beforehand.

PAWNIE: How too intriguing!

[They go off.]

TOM: So you've broken it off already?

BUNTY: Yes.

TOM: I didn't know you were going to do it so soon.

BUNTY: It's better to get things over.

TOM: What did he say?

BUNTY: Nothing much.

TOM: Was he furious?

BUNTY: Oh! what does it matter? Don't let's go on about it.

TOM: It's all damned awkward.

BUNTY: What?

THE VORTEX

TOM: The whole thing.

BUNTY: You're rather scared, aren't you?

TOM: No, not exactly—now that I've got you to back me up.

BUNTY: I shall be glad when we're out of this house.

TOM: So shall I.

BUNTY: I hate the atmosphere.

TOM: I don't know how I've stood it for so long.

BUNTY: You didn't notice it until I came, any more than I noticed Nicky's atmosphere until you came.

TOM: It's queer, isn't it?

BUNTY: We're reverting to type, don't you see?

TOM: How d'you mean?

BUNTY: Never mind, it's true.

TOM: Do you think I'm being a cad to Florence?

BUNTY: Yes, I do rather.

TOM: But, Bunty! You said this morning——

BUNTY: That I didn't see how you could help yourself, neither I do—it's frightfully difficult, but it's not altogether your fault, any more than it would have been mine if I'd married Nicky. One gets carried away by glamour, and personality, and magnetism—they're beastly treacherous things.

TOM: You are wonderful.

BUNTY: Don't be silly.

TOM: You're so cool and clear, and you see everything.

BUNTY: I'm sorry—for Nicky.

THE VORTEX

TOM: Oh, damn Nicky!

BUNTY (*laughing*): Oh, Tom!

TOM: Why, what's up?

BUNTY: You're so dead set.

TOM: You're worth ten of him any day. What's the use of a chap like that? He *doesn't do* anything except play the piano—he can't play any games, he's always trying to be funny——

BUNTY: Shut up, Tom, you're being rather cheap; I haven't reverted to type so quickly that I can't see some of the things I'm missing.

TOM: I wish I knew what you were talking about.

BUNTY: Oh, God! I feel so miserable!

[*She burst into tears.*]

TOM (*flummoxed*): I say—Bunty—for Heaven's sake——

[*He puts his arms round her.*]

BUNTY (*shaking him off*): Don't, don't—give me my shoes——

[*He picks up her shoes; she puts them on. She is half sobbing all the time.*]

TOM: I say, old girl, hadn't you better go to bed? You're all wrought up!

BUNTY: He said beastly things.

TOM: I'll wring his neck.

BUNTY (*with a fresh burst of tears*): Shut up, Tom, shut up——

THE VORTEX

TOM: Bunty, stop crying—there's a dear—please, please stop crying——

[*He takes her in his arms and kisses her, she is groping for her handkerchief. FLORENCE comes quietly downstairs.*]

BUNTY: I can't find my hanky!

TOM: Here's mine.

FLORENCE (*like a pistol shot*): Tom!

[*TOM and BUNTY break away.*]

TOM: Yes, Florence?

FLORENCE (*ominously*): What does this mean?

TOM: I'm sorry, Florence—I——

FLORENCE: You utter cad!

BUNTY: Look here—I should like to say——

FLORENCE: Be quiet—mind your own business.

[*NICKY enters.*]

NICKY (*seeing tears on BUNTY's face*): What's the matter—is anybody hurt?

FLORENCE (*ominously*): No, not hurt!

BUNTY: I banged my hand, that's all.

FLORENCE: Liar!

NICKY: Mother—don't be so stupid——

TOM: Florence—I——

FLORENCE: Don't *speak* to me——

NICKY (*quietly*): Mother—not now—not now—it's

THE VORTEX

all wrong—control yourself! Bunty—Bunty—do go to bed—please.

[He goes to the piano and begins to play jazz.]

BUNTY: All right—Tom——

[FLORENCE goes to the fireplace, trembling with rage. NICKY goes on playing. TOM and BUNTY go towards the stairs.]

FLORENCE: Stop—I want an explanation, please!

BUNTY: How dare you speak to me like that?

FLORENCE: Get out of my house! Get out of my house!

BUNTY: This is disgusting!

TOM: I say, Florence——

FLORENCE: Get out of my house!

BUNTY: I shall leave the first thing in the morning, it's much too late to-night.

[She goes off.]

[NICKY never stops playing for a moment.]

FLORENCE: Tom. *(He goes towards her absolutely silent.)* You kissed her—you kissed her—I saw you——!

TOM: Yes.

FLORENCE: In this house!

TOM: Yes, Florence, I apologise.

FLORENCE: Apologise! You're beneath contempt—never speak to me again, never touch me again—I hate you!

THE VORTEX

TOM: Look here, Florence—I'm desperately sorry—you see, I'm afraid I love her.

FLORENCE (*hysterically*): You dare to stand there and say that to me? It's incredible—after all I've done for you—after all we've been to one another. Love! You don't know what it means. You've lied to me—all these months. It's contemptible—humiliating. Get out of my sight!

TOM (*turning and going upstairs*): Very well.

FLORENCE (*suddenly realizing that he is gone*): Tom—Tom—come back—come back——!

[*She runs upstairs after him. NICKY at last stops playing and lets his hands drop from the keys.*]

CURTAIN

ACT III

ACT III

The scene is FLORENCE'S bedroom the same night—about two hours have elapsed. When the curtain rises FLORENCE is lying face downwards on the bed, she is dressed in a very beautiful but slightly exotic negligé.

HELEN is standing by the window fully dressed, she is holding the curtain aside, and a bar of moonlight comes in to mingle with the amber of the dressing-table lights. FLORENCE is obviously extremely hysterical.

HELEN: Florence, what is the use of going on like that?

FLORENCE: I wish I were dead!

HELEN: It's so cowardly to give way utterly—as you're doing.

FLORENCE: I don't care—I don't care!

HELEN: If you don't face things in this world, they only hit you much harder in the end.

FLORENCE: He loved me—he adored me!

HELEN: Never! He hadn't got it in him.

FLORENCE: After all I've done for him, to go to—to Bunty!

HELEN (*leaving the window*): If it hadn't been Bunty it would have been someone else—don't you see how inevitable it was?

FLORENCE: How dared they!—Here!—In this house!

HELEN: That's a little thing, it doesn't matter at all.

FLORENCE: It does—it does——

HELEN: Florence, sit up and pull yourself together.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE (*sitting up slowly*): I think I'm going mad.

HELEN: Not a bit of it, you're just thoroughly hysterical.

FLORENCE: Give me some water.

[HELEN goes to the bathroom and returns with a glass of water.]

FLORENCE (*taking it*): What time is it?

HELEN (*looking at her watch*): Ten past one.

FLORENCE: Don't go to London by the early train, Helen; stay and come up with me in the car

HELEN: Very well.

FLORENCE: Thank God, you were here!

HELEN: I wish I'd known what was happening, I might have done something.

FLORENCE: What can I do to get him back?

HELEN: Don't be silly.

FLORENCE: What can I do—what can I do——?

HELEN: Do you mean to say you'd *take* him back after to-night?

FLORENCE: No, never. Not if he crawled to me—never——

HELEN: Well, then, make up your mind definitely never to see him again whatever happens.

FLORENCE: Yes—I will.

HELEN: Why don't you go to bed now?

FLORENCE: I couldn't sleep.

HELEN: Put it all out of your mind—make an effort.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: I can't—I'm too unhappy.

HELEN: Think of Nicky.

FLORENCE: Nicky's young.

HELEN: That doesn't make it any better for him

FLORENCE: He'll get over it in the long run.

HELEN: The long run never counts at the moment.

FLORENCE: He wasn't in love—really?

HELEN: As much as either you or he are capable of it.

FLORENCE: He's well rid of her—she'd never have appreciated him properly—she hasn't the intelligence.

HELEN: I don't agree with you there—she's got intelligence right enough.

FLORENCE: Treacherous little beast!

HELEN: Yes, but far-seeing.

FLORENCE: Are you standing up for her? Do you think it was *right* of her to get Tom away from me?

HELEN: Yes, quite right.

FLORENCE: Helen!

HELEN: To do her justice, she didn't deliberately set herself out to get him away from you at all. She discovered that in spite of the somewhat decadent years Tom was still her type, and likely to remain so. So with common sense she decided to shelve Nicky forthwith and go for him.

FLORENCE: Her type indeed!

HELEN: Yes, she'd have been quite a nice girl really if she'd been left alone and not allowed to go to Paris and get into the wrong set.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: You are extraordinary, Helen. Do you realize that you're making excuses for the girl who's betrayed your best friend?

HELEN: Don't be so utterly absurd—I'm not making excuses, and anyhow she hasn't betrayed you. She hardly knows you in the first place, and she's just followed her instincts regardless of anyone else's feelings—as you've done thousands of times.

FLORENCE: Helen—you're being horrible to me!

HELEN: I'm not, I'm trying to make you see! You're battering your head against silly cast-iron delusions, and I want to dislodge them.

FLORENCE: Helen, I'm so unhappy—so desperately unhappy.

HELEN: Yes, but not because you've lost Tom, it's something far deeper than that.

FLORENCE: What then?

HELEN: You're on the wrong tack, and have been for years.

FLORENCE: I don't understand.

HELEN: You *won't* understand!

[FLORENCE gets off the bed and goes over to the dressing-table. She sits and stares at herself in the glass for a moment without speaking.]

FLORENCE: My eyes are sore. (*She powders her face and sprays a little scent on her hair.*) It's so lovely this—and so refreshing.

HELEN: I think I'll go to bed now.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: No, wait a little longer with me—please Helen—just a few minutes.

HELEN: It's so hot in here.

FLORENCE: Open the window then.

HELEN: All right.

[She goes to the window and opens it. FLORENCE takes a cigarette out of a box and then shakes a scent-bottle and rubs the cigarette lightly with the stopper.]

FLORENCE: Do you ever do this? It's divine.

HELEN: What a wonderfully clear night—you can see the hills right across the valley—the moon's quite strong.

[FLORENCE goes to the window and stands next to HELEN looking out—she is puffing her cigarette.]

FLORENCE: I chose this room in the first place because the view was so lovely.

HELEN: Do you ever look at it?

FLORENCE (*listlessly*): Of course I do, often!

HELEN: It's been raining—I wish you'd throw away that cigarette—it spoils the freshness.

FLORENCE (*turning away*): It's soothing me—calming my nerves.

HELEN: I do wish I could help you—really!

FLORENCE: You are helping me, darling—you're being an angel.

HELEN (*suddenly angry*): Don't talk so empty, Florence, I'm worth more than that.

FLORENCE: I don't know what you mean.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: It sickens me to see you getting back so soon.

FLORENCE: Getting back?

HELEN: Yes, to your usual worthless attitude of mind.

FLORENCE: Helen!

HELEN: A little while ago you were really suffering for once, and in a way I was glad because it showed you were capable of a genuine emotion. Now you're glossing it over—smarming it down with your returning vanity, soon you won't be unhappy any more—just vindictive.

FLORENCE: Don't go on at me like that—I'm too wretched.

HELEN (*going to her*): Florence dear, forgive me, but it's true—and I don't want it to be.

[The door opens and NICKY enters. He is in dressing-gown and pyjamas. His face looks strained and white.]

FLORENCE: Nicky!

NICKY: Helen, I want to talk to mother, please.

HELEN: All right, Nicky.

FLORENCE: What is it?

NICKY: I couldn't sleep.

HELEN: Florence dear—good night.

FLORENCE: No—no, Helen—don't go yet——

HELEN: I must.

FLORENCE: Helen—stay with me.

NICKY: Please go.

THE VORTEX

HELEN: I can't stay, Florence—it's quite impossible.

[*She goes out.*]

FLORENCE: I don't know what you mean—by coming here and ordering Helen out of my room.

NICKY: I'm sorry, mother. I felt I had to talk to you alone.

FLORENCE: At this hour of the night—you're mad!

NICKY: No I'm not, I think I'm probably more unhappy than I've ever been in my life.

FLORENCE: You're young—you'll get over it.

NICKY: I hope so.

FLORENCE: I knew the first moment I saw her—what sort of a girl she was.

NICKY: Oh, mother!

FLORENCE: It's true. I had an *instinct* about her.

NICKY: It's all been rather a shock, you know——

FLORENCE (*becoming motherly*): Yes, dear—I know—I know—but you mustn't be miserable about her—she isn't worth it. (*She goes to kiss him.*)

NICKY (*gently pushing her away*): Don't, mother!

FLORENCE: Listen, Nicky—go back to bed now—there's a dear—my head's splitting.

NICKY: I can't yet.

FLORENCE: Take some asperin—that'll calm your nerves.

NICKY: I'm afraid I'm a little beyond asperin.

FLORENCE: I don't want you to think I don't sym-

THE VORTEX

pathize with you, darling—my heart *aches* for you—I know so well what you're going through.

NICKY: Do you?

FLORENCE: It's agony—absolute agony—but, you see—it will wear off—it always does in time. (NICKY *doesn't answer*.) Nicky, please go now!

NICKY: I want to talk to you.

FLORENCE: To-morrow—we'll talk to-morrow.

NICKY: No, now—*now*!

FLORENCE: You're inconsiderate and cruel—I've told you my head's bursting.

NICKY: I want to sympathize with you, too—and try to understand everything—as well as I can——

FLORENCE: Understand everything?

NICKY: Yes, please.

FLORENCE: I don't know what you mean——

NICKY: Will you tell me things—as though I were somebody quite different?

FLORENCE: What kind of things?

NICKY: Things about you—your life.

FLORENCE: Really, Nicky—you're ridiculous—asking me to tell you stories at this hour!

NICKY (*with dead vehemence*): Mother—sit down quietly. I'm not going out of this room until I've got everything straight in my mind.

FLORENCE (*sinking down—almost hypnotized*): Nicky—please—I——

THE VORTEX

NICKY: Tom Veryan has been your lover, hasn't he?

FLORENCE (*almost shrieking*): Nicky—how dare you!

NICKY: Keep calm—it's our only chance—keep calm.

FLORENCE (*bursting into tears*): How dare you speak to me like that—suggest such a thing—I——

NICKY: It's true, isn't it?

FLORENCE: Go away—go away!

NICKY: It's true, isn't it?

FLORENCE: No—no!

NICKY: It's true, isn't it?

FLORENCE: No—I tell you—no—no—no!

NICKY: You're lying to me, mother. What's the use of that?

FLORENCE: You're mad—mad——

NICKY: Does father know?

FLORENCE: Go away!

NICKY: Does father know?

FLORENCE: Your father knows nothing—he doesn't understand me any more than you do.

NICKY: Then it's between us alone.

FLORENCE: I tell you I don't know what you're talking about.

NICKY: Mother—don't go on like that, it's useless—we've arrived at a crisis, wherever we go—whatever we do we can't escape from it. I know we're neither of us very strong-minded or capable, and we haven't much hope of coming through successfully—but let's try—it's

THE VORTEX

no good pretending any more—our lives are built up of pretences all the time. For years—ever since I began to think at all, I've been bolstering up my illusions about you. People have made remarks not realizing that I was your son, and I've pretended that they were inspired by cattiness and jealousy. I've noticed things—trivial in-criminating little incidents, and I've brushed them aside and not thought any more about them because you were my mother—clever and beautiful and successful—and naturally people *would* slander you *because* you were so beautiful—and now I *know*—they were right!

FLORENCE: Nicky—I implore you—go away now—leave me alone.

NICKY: No, I can't.

FLORENCE: You're cruel—cruel to torment me——

NICKY: I don't want to be cruel——

FLORENCE: Go to bed then, and we'll talk everything over quietly another time.

NICKY: It is true about Tom Veryan, isn't it?

FLORENCE: No. No——

NICKY: We're on awfully dangerous ground—I'm straining every nerve to keep myself under control. If you lie to me and try to evade me any more—I won't be answerable for what might happen.

FLORENCE (*dropping her voice—terrified*): What do you mean?

NICKY: I don't know—I'm frightened.

FLORENCE: Nicky—darling Nicky—I——

[*She approaches him.*]

THE VORTEX

NICKY: Don't touch me, please.

FLORENCE: Have a little pity for me.

NICKY: Was Tom Verman your lover?

FLORENCE (*in a whisper*): Yes.

NICKY: I want to understand why——

FLORENCE: He loved me.

NICKY: But you—did you love him?

FLORENCE: Yes.

NICKY: It was something you couldn't help, wasn't it—something that's always been the same in you since you were quite, quite young——?

FLORENCE: Yes, Nicky—yes——

NICKY: And there have been others, too, haven't there?

FLORENCE (*with her face in her hands*): I won't be cross-questioned any more—I won't—I won't——

NICKY: I wish you'd understand I'm not blaming you—I'm trying to help you—to help us both——

FLORENCE: What good can all this possibly do?

NICKY: Clear things up, of course. I can't go on any more half knowing——

FLORENCE: Why should that side of my life be any concern of yours?

NICKY: But, mother!

FLORENCE: I'm different from other women—completely different—and you expect me to be the same—why can't you realize that with a temperament like mine

THE VORTEX

it's impossible to live an ordinary humdrum life—you're not a boy any longer—you're a man—and——

NICKY: I'm nothing—I've grown up all wrong.

FLORENCE: It's not my fault.

NICKY: Of course it's your fault, mother—who else's fault *could* it be?

FLORENCE: Your friends—the people you mix with——

NICKY: It wouldn't matter *who* I mixed with if only I had a background.

FLORENCE: You've got as much money as you want—you've got your home——

NICKY (*bitterly*): Home! That's almost funny—there's no peace anywhere—nothing but the ceaseless din of trying to be amused——

FLORENCE: David never complains.

NICKY: I don't suppose you've looked at father during the last few years—or you wouldn't say that.

FLORENCE: He's perfectly happy because he's sensible—he lives his own life and doesn't try to interfere with mine.

NICKY: It must be your vanity that makes you so dreadfully blind—and foolish.

FLORENCE: Understand once and for all, I *won't* be spoken to like this——

NICKY: You've had other lovers besides Tom Vryan—haven't you?

FLORENCE: Yes, I have—I have. Now then!

THE VORTEX

NICKY: Well, anyhow—that's the truth—at last——

[He rises, turns his back on her and stands looking out of the window.]

FLORENCE (*after a pause—going to him*): Nicky—don't be angry—please don't be angry with me.

NICKY: I'm not angry a bit—I realize that I'm living in a world where things like this happen—and they've got to be faced and given the right value. If only I'd had the courage to realize everything before—it wouldn't be so bad now—it's the sudden shock that's thrown the whole thing out of focus for me—but I mean to get it right—please help me!

FLORENCE (*dully*): I don't know what to do.

NICKY: It's your life, and you've lived it as you've wanted to live it—that's fair——

FLORENCE: Yes—yes.

NICKY: You've wanted love always—passionate love, because you were made like that—it's not your fault—it's the fault of circumstances and civilization—civilization makes rottenness so much easier—we're utterly rotten—both of us——

FLORENCE: Nicky—don't—don't——

NICKY: How can we help ourselves?—We swirl about in a vortex of beastliness—this is a chance—don't you see—to realize the truth—our only chance.

FLORENCE: Oh, Nicky, do stop—go away!

NICKY: Don't keep on telling me to stop when our only hope is to hammer it out.

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE: You're overwrought—it isn't as bad as you think.

NICKY: Isn't it?

FLORENCE: No, no. Of course it isn't. To-morrow morning you'll see things quite differently.

NICKY: You haven't understood.

FLORENCE: Yes, I have—I have.

NICKY: You haven't understood. Oh, my God, you haven't understood! You're building up silly defences in your mind. I'm overwrought. To-morrow morning I shall see things quite differently. That's true—that's the tragedy of it, and you won't see—To-morrow morning I *shall* see things differently. All this will seem unreal—a nightmare—the machinery of our lives will go on again and gloss over the truth as it always does—and our chance will be gone for ever.

FLORENCE: Chance—chance? What are you talking about—what chance?

NICKY: I must make you see somehow.

FLORENCE: You're driving me mad.

NICKY: Have patience with me—please—please——

FLORENCE (*wildly*): How can I have patience with you?—You exaggerate everything.

NICKY: No I don't—I wish I did.

FLORENCE: Listen—let me explain something to you.

NICKY: Very well—go on.

FLORENCE: You're setting yourself up in judgment on me—your own mother.

THE VORTEX

NICKY: No I'm not.

FLORENCE: You are—you are—let me speak—you don't understand my temperament in the least—nobody does—I——

NICKY: You're deceiving yourself—your temperament's no different from thousands of other women, but you've been weak and selfish and given way all along the line——

FLORENCE: Let me speak, I tell you——!

NICKY: What's the use—you're still pretending—you're building up barriers between us instead of helping me to break them down.

FLORENCE: What are you accusing me of having done?

NICKY: Can't you see yet?

FLORENCE: No, I can't. If you're preaching morality you've no right to—that's my affair—I've never done any harm to anyone.

NICKY: Look at me.

FLORENCE: Why—what do you mean?

NICKY: You've given me *nothing* all my life—nothing that counts.

FLORENCE: Now you're pitying yourself.

NICKY: Yes, with every reason.

FLORENCE: You're neurotic and ridiculous—just because Bunty broke off your engagement you come and say wicked, cruel things to me——

NICKY: You forget what I've seen to-night, mother.

FLORENCE: I don't care what you've seen.

THE VORTEX

NICKY: I've seen you make a vulgar, disgusting scene in your own house, and on top of that humiliate yourself before a boy half your age. The misery of losing Bunty faded away when that happened—everything is comparative after all.

FLORENCE: I didn't humiliate myself——

NICKY: You ran after him up the stairs because your vanity wouldn't let you lose him—it isn't that you love him—that would be easier—you never love anyone, you only love them loving you—all your so-called passion and temperament is false—your whole existence had degenerated into an endless empty craving for admiration and flattery—and then you say you've done no harm to anybody. Father used to be a clever man, with a strong will and a capacity for enjoying everything—I can remember him like that, and now he's nothing—a complete nonentity because his spirit's crushed. How could it be otherwise? You've let him down consistently for years—and God knows I'm nothing for him to look forward to—but I might have been if it hadn't been for you——

FLORENCE: Don't talk like that. Don't—don't—it can't be such a crime being loved—it can't be such a crime being happy——

NICKY: You're not happy—you're never happy—you're fighting—fighting all the time to keep your youth and your looks—because you can't bear the thought of living without them—as though they mattered in the end.

FLORENCE (*hysterically*): What does anything matter—ever?

THE VORTEX

NICKY: That's what I'm trying to find out.

FLORENCE: I'm still young inside—I'm still beautiful—why shouldn't I live my life as I choose?

NICKY: You're not young or beautiful; I'm seeing for the first time how old you are—it's horrible—your silly fair hair—and your face all plastered and painted——

FLORENCE: Nicky—Nicky—stop—stop—stop!

[She flings herself face downwards on the bed.

NICKY goes over to her.

NICKY: Mother!

FLORENCE: Go away—go away—I hate you—go away——

NICKY: Mother—sit up——

FLORENCE (*pulling herself together*): Go out of my room——

NICKY: Mother——

FLORENCE: I don't ever want to see you again—you're insane—you've said wicked, wicked things to me—you've talked to me as though I were a woman off the streets. I can't bear any more—I can't bear any more!

NICKY: I have a slight confession to make——

FLORENCE: Confession?

NICKY: Yes.

FLORENCE: Go away—go away——

NICKY (*taking a small gold box from his pocket*): Look——

FLORENCE: What do you mean—what is it——?

THE VORTEX

NICKY: Don't you know?

[FLORENCE *takes the box with trembling fingers and opens it. She stares at it for a moment. When she speaks again her voice is quite dead.*

FLORENCE: Nicky, it isn't—you haven't——?

NICKY: Why do you look so shocked?

FLORENCE (*dully*): Oh, my God!

NICKY: What does it matter?

[FLORENCE *suddenly rises and hurls the box out of the window.*

That doesn't make it any better.

FLORENCE (*flinging herself on her knees beside him*): Nicky, promise me, oh, promise you'll never do it again—never in your life—it's frightful—horrible——

NICKY: It's only just the beginning.

FLORENCE: What can I say to you—what can I say to you?

NICKY: Nothing—under the circumstances.

FLORENCE: What do you mean?

NICKY: It can't possibly matter—now.

FLORENCE: Matter—but it's the finish of everything—you're young, you're just starting on your life—you must stop—you must swear never to touch it again—swear to me on your oath, Nicky—I'll help you—I'll help you——

NICKY: You!

[*He turns away.*

THE VORTEX

FLORENCE (*burying her face in her hands and moaning*):
Oh—oh—oh!

NICKY: How could you possibly help me?

FLORENCE (*clutching him*): Nicky!

NICKY (*almost losing control*): Shut up—shut up—
don't touch me——

FLORENCE (*trying to take him in her arms*): Nicky—
Nicky——

NICKY: I'm trying to control myself, but you won't
let me—you're an awfully rotten woman, really.

FLORENCE: Nicky—stop—stop—stop——

[*She beats him with her fists.*]

NICKY: Leave go of me!

[*He breaks away from her, and going up to the
dressing-table he sweeps everything off on to the floor
with his arm.*]

FLORENCE (*screaming*): Oh—oh—Nicky——!

NICKY: Now then! Now then! You're not to have
any more lovers; you're not going to be beautiful and
successful ever again—you're going to be my mother for
once—it's about time I had one to help me, before I go
over the edge altogether——

FLORENCE: Nicky—Nicky——

NICKY: Promise me to be different—you've got to
promise me!

FLORENCE (*sinking on to the end of couch, facing audience*):
Yes—yes—I promise—(*the tears are running down her
face*).

THE VORTEX

NICKY: I love you, really—that's why it's so awful.

[He falls on his knees by her side and buries his face in her lap.]

FLORENCE: No. No, not awful—don't say that—I love you, too.

NICKY (*sobbing hopelessly*): Oh, mother——!

FLORENCE (*staring in front of her*): I wish I were dead!

NICKY: It doesn't matter about death, but it matters terribly about life.

FLORENCE: I know——

NICKY (*desperately*): Promise me you'll be different—promise me you'll be different——

FLORENCE: Yes, yes—I'll try——

NICKY: We'll both try.

FLORENCE: Yes, dear.—Oh, my dear——!

[She sits quite still, staring in front of her—the tears are rolling down her cheeks, and she is stroking NICKY's hair mechanically in an effort to calm him]

CURTAIN

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